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"A Tale for the Time Being": Reader's Guide for the 2016 LMU Common Book

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A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING

BY RUTH OZEKI

Consider some of the following questions as you read or discuss the Common Book. We'd love to hear your thoughts, too! Share them with us at commonbook@lmu.edu. You can also connect with us at facebook.com/lmucommonbook, or by using the #lmucommonbook hashtag.

Structure

- A Tale for the Time Being begins with Ozeki's first-person narrator expressing deep curiosity about the unknown person who might be reading her narrative. How did you respond to this opening and its unusual focus on the circumstances of the reader?
- What does it mean to be a time-being? Do you think Nao, Ruth, and Oliver share the same understandings of what a time-being is?

Writing

- What is the significance of Nao choosing to write her diary inside the cover of the classic novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust? Proust's title can be translated as "In search of lost time." How is that title fitting for Nao's journal?
- Nao says that "secret French diaries seem to run in the family," since Nao hides her writing inside Proust, and Haruki hides his journal by writing in French. For whom or to whom is each one writing? Are their journals read by their intended audiences?
- Imagine that you had a notebook like Nao's diary and you wanted to communicate with an unknown reader as she does. What would you write about? Would you be as honest as Nao is with us? What are the benefits and risks of writing such a document?
- How does writing an online journal contrast with engaging in a handwritten journal? Is there any distinction? Would you categorize it all the same?

Location

- Why does Nao have such a difficult time adjusting to Japan when her family moves back there from California? Why do her Japanese schoolmates target her so intensely, and what effect does their bullying have on her? Is there any other way she could have dealt with it?
- Ozeki struggles with leaving New York City for the island on the Pacific, but Nao is comforted when she leaves Tokyo for the countryside. How does the geography of place impact an individual's experience? How does it impact the book's theme of global connectedness?

Characters/Relationships

- Although Nao's feelings of isolation are central to the novel, the reader senses isolation in Ruth as well. In what ways do Nao and Ruth form two halves of the same character? Why do you think Ruth feels that Nao's diary was written specifically for her?
- Though we may feel for her in her struggles and suffering, Nao is no angel. She is extremely harsh toward her father, and, given the opportunity, she tyrannizes over her hapless schoolmate Daisuke. Does Ozeki sacrifice some of the sympathy that we might otherwise feel for Nao? What does Ozeki's novel gain by making Nao less appealing than she might be?
- Nao describes her 104-year-old grandmother as "the famous anarchist-feminist-novelist-turned-Buddhist-nun." How would you describe Jiko? What is her influence on Nao?
- Do you find Nao's father to be a sympathetic character? What is he struggling with? Should he or could he have done more as a father for Nao?

Bullying and Suicide

- Responding to the ill treatment that Nao reports in her diary, Ruth's husband Oliver observes, "We live in a bully culture" (121). Is he right? What responses to society's bullying does *A Tale for the Time Being* suggest? Are they likely to be effective?
- Several videos of Nao being bullied go viral. Nao watches as the number of views of her mock funeral rises, and feels "almost proud". Does the attention Nao receives from social media serve to validate her existence, or does it further her isolation and invisibility?
- Suicide, whether in the form of Haruki #1's kamikaze mission or the contemplated suicides of Haruki #2 and Nao, hangs heavily over *A Tale for the Time Being*. Nevertheless, Ozeki's story manages to affirm life. How does Ozeki use suicide as a means to illustrate the value of life?

Environment

- *A Tale for the Time Being* expresses concern about the environment. How do Ruth Ozeki's observations about the environment affect the mood of her novel?
- The presence of the jungle crow on the island is an unexpected surprise. Is this a symbol? If so, of what? What does the jungle crow represent to Ruth? To you?